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# Ship English

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by

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**Report**

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**Ship English**

by

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This historical sociolinguistic study investigates the language of English seamen in the seventeenth century. Built on language data compiled from log books (Matthews 1935) and a survey of the maritime population from 1582, the author argues that the seafaring community had developed its own sociolect, which was based on the dialects of Southern England. Writers (e.g. Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe) and historians describe this "Ship English":

> [S]ailors stood out from landsmen in a variety of ways. In the first place by their dress [...] Sailors were also recognisable by their speech, in which technical terms, slang and oaths had thickened to produce a private language. (Burke 1996:44-45)

Following Ross and Bailey (1988), the author argues that this sociolect emerged from dialect contact (Trudgill 2004) aboard ship, with Southern dialects as the major input varieties: Several phonological features of Southern Early Modern English (e.g. diphthongization of Middle English /u:/ and /a:/, split of /u/ into /ʌ/

and /ʊ/, /w/-/v/ interchange) are pervasive in the data. Apart from being a interesting case study in itself, the results might be of importance for research on pidgins and creoles and colonial dialects: it has been argued (Hancock 1976) that nautical English has had a profound impact on the emergence of anglophone creoles because it – rather than some kind of Standard English – was the actual "superstrate" variety for most creoles. For the same reason, it might have influenced the emergence of the overseas varieties of English.

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*0. Introduction*

In this paper, I present a study of "Ship English": the speech of English seamen in the seventeenth century.

*0.1. Previous Research*

From the 17th century on, we find dictionaries compiling "sea language" and "sailor's slang", technical terms and idioms connected with the seafaring community (e.g. Granville 1962; Manwayring [1644] 1972 ). There is no doubt that sailors had an extensive, unique vocabulary of their own, we might call it the sailors' register. The idea of a sailors' sociolect (i.e. what we are going to call Ship English henceforth) with a unique phonology was first introduced by William Matthews (1935) in his study of *Sailors' Pronunciation in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century*. Matthews searched logbooks and letters for idiosyncrasies in spelling: Semi-literate sailors tended to write words as they pronounced them in a kind of phonetic transcription. His study lists 67 features in which Ship English phonology seems to differ from modern and early modern Standard English. However, Matthews intended this study to be purely descriptive:

> This study […] should be regarded as a crosssection in the history of pronunciation, an account of the various pronunciations in use among the tarpaulin seamen of the second half of the 17th century. It is not pretended that it describes the "seaman's dialect" of the period; nor is any attempt made to create genealogies for the pronunciations described.
> (Matthews 1935: 196)

Fifty years after Matthews, Guy Bailey and Garry Ross (1988) studied the morphosyntax of Ship English. Using mainly the same sources as Matthews, they found that Ship English was a "stable variety" (Bailey and Ross 1988: 207) which differed strongly from Standard Early Modern English but did not show "truly

aberrant features" (ibid.). They suggest it was a "leveled lect" and discuss a possible influence on creole development: "While the inventory presented here", they conclude their paper, "is hardly an exhaustive account of the morphosyntax of Ship English, it provides a place to begin in reassessing [its] role" (Bailey and Ross 1988: 209).

But why would we want to study the sailors' language in the first place? The importance of Ship English has been acknowledged by several authors for various reasons: The influence of the nautical lexicon on the English language in Britain has been documented, amongst others, by Colcord (1945) and Müller-Schotte (1970) or the more recent *Not enough room to swing a cat* (Robson 2008). Raymond Hickey (2004: 50) speculates in his work on the *Legacies of Colonial English* that "the foundations for features of later varieties at the destination of the ships' voyages could have been laid during the transatlantic journey [i.e. on the ship]." Several authors have also argued that sailors' speech had an impact on the evolution of anglophone creoles. Ian Hancock (1976: 23), for instance, writes in his study of *Nautical Sources in Krio Vocabulary* that

> [t]he English used during nearly all African/European contact to date has of necessity been nautical, and it is hardly surprising that a nautical element is apparent in Krio, as it is indeed in most creoles, today.

He puts forward the idea of a mixing of the dialects aboard ship, with a "'common denominator' dialect […] establishing itself and becoming increasingly widespread as recruits became more seasoned" (Hancock 1976: 24). This specific dialect, rather than some kind of Standard English (StE), would then have shaped creole languages all over the world. The lexical influence of nautical speech on creoles is also discussed in Reineke (1969) and Mühlhäusler (1986: 97-99).

*0.2. This paper*

In the following, I will work with the data reported by Matthews and Bailey. I will present evidence from literary and scholarly writing which shows that a variety we might call Ship English indeed existed; we will then look at the life and work of the sailors, and discuss whether can see them as a speech community of some sort.
I will, following Bailey and Ross (1988), treat the emergence of Ship English as a result of dialect contact, using a 16th century survey of the maritime population to establish the input dialects. Peter Trudgill's (2004) model of new dialect formation will allow us to predict a possible outcome of this particular contact situation and see to what extent the sources support this.

*0.3. Evidence for the Existence of Ship English*

Actual speakers of Ship English have been dead for centuries now. However, traces of their language can be found in literary works from early modern England. Socio-historical studies support the argument for the existence of a distinctive sailors' lect. "The sea language", Admiral ([1620] 1913: 434) reports in the early 17th century, "is not soon learned, much less understood, being only proper to him that has served his apprenticeship." The seaman was a remarkable personality in pre-modern England. A justice of peace reports in his description of London:

> The seamen here are a generation differing from all the world. When one goes into Rotherhite and Wapping, which places are chiefly inhabited by sailors […] a man would be apt to suspect himself in another country. Their manner of living, speaking, acting, dressing and behaving are so very peculiar to themselves. Yet with all their oddities, they are perhaps the bravest and boldest fellows in the universe.
> (Fielding 1776: 15)

In the following, we will look at examples how this particular "manner of speaking" is reflected in literary and nonfiction writing from the Renaissance on.
Falconer (Falconer 1964; 1965), for instance, studied the use of sea language in

Shakespeare. Besides a lot of nautical imagery, Falconer finds a "surprisingly extensive and exact use of the technical terms. The same exactness […] is found, too, when the talk of seamen or when words of command come in" (Falconer 1965:vii). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, the character Pistol announces his wedding plans as follows:

> This pink[1] is one of Cupid's carriers.
> Clap on more sails; pursue; up with your fights[2];
> Give fire! She is my prize, or ocean whelm them all.
> (Shakespeare [1602] 1969: 32)

Shakespeare's contemporary Sir Thomas Overbury describes the language of the sailor in his description of *New and Choise Characters*:

> A SAYLER Is a picht peece of reason calkt and tackeld; and only studied to dispute with tempests […] his language is a new confusion.
> (Overbury [1614] 1936:22-23)

A century later, Jonathan Swift writes in *Gulliver's Travels*:

> I hear some of our Sea-*Yahoos* find Fault with my Sea-Language, as not proper in many parts, nor now in use. I cannot help it. In my first Voyages, while I was young, I was instructed by the oldest Mariners, and learned to speak as they did. But I have since found that the Sea-*Yahoos* are apt, like the Land ones, to become new fangled[3] in their Words […]
> (Swift [1735] 2003:7)

Fellow satirist Edward Ward derides the sailor's idiom in *The Wooden World* (1706):

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[1] Falconer, 56: A small sailing vessel, flat bottomed and fast […]. Some editors read it as “punk”, i.e. prostitute.
[2] Falconer, 28: Canvas screens rigged in a ship to conceal men or protect them from gunfire.
[3] Oxford English Dictionary: Characterized by crotchets or fopperies.

> At every Turn, you discover him by his Phrases, as apparently as you can the Spots of the Moon with a Telescope. His Language is all *Heathen Greek* [his emphasis] to a Cobler; and he cannot have so much as a Tooth drawn ashore, without carrying his interpreter. It is the aftmost Grinder aloft, on the Starboard Quarter, will he cry to the all-wondering Operator.
> (Ward [1706] 1929: 49-50)

No surprisingly, these perceived linguistic differences mirror a deeper social divide between the sailors and the Elizabethan 'mainstream'. Scholars studying the sailors' representation in literature (Robinson 1909; Watson 1931) agree that we find two ways of depicting the sailor: On the one hand, their professional skills and courage were admired. Their drinking, swearing and general roughness, however, made them socially unacceptable in some circles. Daniel Defoe (quoted in: Earle 1998: 13) complained that "[t]hey swear violently, whore violently, drink punch violently, spend their money when they have it violently [...they] ought to be encouraged to go to sea, for Old Harry can't govern them on shoar." A report to the English Parliament from 1707 finds that

> [The sailors] can scarcely speak without such horrid Imprecations and blasphemous Oaths, as no Christian can hear without horror; [...] they bring such a Contagion of Vice along with them, as makes all People of any Morality detest them.
> (Anonymous 1707: 7)

It therefore makes sense for Peter Burke, in his volume on *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, to see the sailors as part of a maritime sub-culture – a sub-culture being "a system of shared meanings, but the people who participate in it also share the meanings of the culture at large" (Burke 1996: 42) . More specifically, this means that

> sailors stood out from landsmen in a variety of ways. In the first place by their dress [...] the eighteenth century sailor by his pigtail, his check shirt, and, oddest of all at this time, his trousers. Sailors were also recognisable by

> their speech, in which technical terms, slang and oaths had thickened to produce a private language.
> (Burke 1996: 44-5)

In her more detailed research on Elizabethan sailors, Cheryl Fury agrees and similarly finds that

> Seamen possessed their own idiom and colloquialisms. 'Landlubbers' were effectively excluded from this language, which sprang from the extended terminology related to seafaring life.
> (Fury 2002: 87)

This brings to mind Michael Halliday's (1976) study of "Anti-Languages" as the codes of "anti-societies […] set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility" (Halliday 1976:570). He cites research on the secret "pelt" language used by Elizabethan vagabonds, a relexified form version of English. (To some extent, his concept of "society" and "anti-society" parallels Burke's conception of "culture" versus "sub-culture.")

*0.4. The Speech Community*

The standard definition of the Speech community in sociolinguistics follows William Labov, who writes:

> The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage.
> (Labov 1973: 120-1)

Gumperz' (1971: 101) understanding of the linguistic community, on the other hand, rests on the frequency of interaction within a group "held together by

frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by the weaknesses in the lines of communication." He (ibid: 114) adds that "even occupational associations" might be regarded as linguistic communities. In the following, we will see that the sailors fulfill both "requirements" in that they share certain norms and formed a tight-knit social group with frequent interaction.
Two more recent theoretical approaches will help us understand the sociolinguistic context we are dealing with here. The individual sailor was engaged in two community settings: his life was divided between time spent at sea (work) and on land (leave). At sea, he would engage in the small community of the crew; on land he would be immersed in family life and interaction with wider social surroundings.
In the following, we will investigate these two social settings. We will use the Milroys' model of social networks (1980; Milroy 2002) to describe interaction on land; the community aboard ship can best be understood as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The model of social networks in linguistics focuses on the speaker's "aggregate of relationships contracted with others" (Milroy 2002:549). Through social networks, individuals create "personal communities which provide a meaningful framework for solving the problems of daily life" (ibid: 550). Looking at the social network of the Elizabethan seafarer on land, we find that

> The most overwhelming theme to emerge from the study of seamen's lives ashore is the strength of their occupational ties when they were on land. [..S]eamen of all ages and backgrounds looked to those connected with the maritime community as a reference group and a support network and for social interaction […] The bonds between crewmates were not limited to shipboard life; they extended to all aspects of a seaman's life.
> (Fury 2002:239)

This strong community feeling was fostered by the fact that sailors tended to settle next to other sailors, marry sailor's daughters and do business with other sailors:

"[T]hose associated with the maritime crafts formed a community within the larger society" (Fury 2002: 255). This suggests the kind of network which the Milroys would call "dense and multiplex". The members have criss-crossing network ties, that is shared acquaintances, friends and relatives. Linguistically, strong networks act as a norm enforcement mechanism: "Networks constituted chiefly of strong (dense and multiplex) ties support localized linguistic norms, resisting pressures to adopt competing external norms" (Milroy 2002:550). The strong social network and the spatial separation from the "landlubbers" would thus benefit the existence and the propagation of a specific sailors' vernacular.

The seamen's time aboard ship should also have had a considerable impact on their linguistic behavior. The situation at sea is an almost prototypical example for a community of practice as introduced by education theorists Lave and Wenger (1991). The concept has been adapted for linguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992; see also: Meyerhoff 2002):

> A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a community of practice is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.
> (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:464)

Aboard ship, a small group of men (usually 30-40 crew members) were, for several weeks or months, mutually engaged in the endeavor of shipping goods from A to B and, more importantly, to make it home safely to collect their salary. The work aboard and the survival of the individual relied on teamwork among this "aggregate of people"; free time also would be spend with the very same group. Considering this abundance of interaction, linguistic and otherwise, it is not surprising to see

that the sailors on ship would develop a system of shared practices, one of them being a specific way of speaking (cf. the Fielding quote above).

*1. Ship English*

In the following, therefore, I will argue that Ship English emerged on board of British ships during the rise of the English merchant and military marine. The growing number of seamen from the British Isles developed their own sociolect while also becoming a self-contained social group. Following Hancock and Bailey, I will argue that Ship English emerged from a dialect contact situation aboard ship where seamen from all over the British Isles would work together. This dialect mixing, however, was more than just a social accommodation process but an unavoidable necessity. Too many different dialects on board would have hindered communication in a situation where teamwork is of vital importance.

*1.1. Ship English as a Contact Dialect*

The question of how new koinés arise in situations of dialect contact has been tackled most prominently by Peter Trudgill (1986; 2004). In *New Dialect Formation,* he introduces a three stage model of dialect contact to account for the emergence of new varieties of English in overseas settlements (New Zealand being his prime example). It is evident that this model, dealing with dialect speakers settling a foreign, unpopulated country cannot be applied to our study one to one. We are not dealing with a one-time settlement but with the gradual emergence of a variety. However, the basic situation – speakers from different dialect backgrounds come together, find a shared way of speaking and form a new community – is similar and it seems sensible to expect comparable processes at work in this situation. According to Trudgill (2004: 26) the outcome of dialect mixing is not haphazard but rule-governed and predictable:

> I maintain that, given sufficient linguistic information about the dialects which contribute to the mixture and given sufficient demographic information about the proportion of speakers of the different dialects, it is possible, within certain limitations, to make predictions about what the outcome of the mixture will be, at least in broad outline.

The two later stages of his model involve the first native speakers of the new lect and need not concern us here. Stage I, "rudimentary levelling and interdialectal development" (Trudgill 2004: 89-94) is what we are looking for. By levelling, Trudgill understands the loss of demographically minority forms and socially or linguistically marked forms. In addition to adopting the majority variant, speakers might also agree on "interdialectal forms" as a kind of linguistic "compromise": intermediate forms of a certain variable. The process of new dialect formation is thus "equally mechanical and inevitable" (ibid: 149). Trudgill stresses that social or linguistic factors are not decisive in this process, but rather the sheer number of speakers.

> [I]t becomes clear that the crucial explanatory factor for the way levelling takes place is the *survival of majority variants* [his emphasis...The new dialect] is the result of a levelling process which, for the most part, consisted of the loss of demographically minority forms.
> (Trudgill 2004: 214)

Thus, dialect mixing and the emergence of the new variety is a quantitative rather than a qualitative process.

To find out what Ship English might have looked (or rather: sounded) like, we then first have to find out which dialects these men brought with them, the input dialects. There is little data on the seafaring population of England; only one comprehensive survey exists, conducted in 1582 under Queen Elizabeth (reported in Andrews (1991). The table below shows the numbers of seamen for each county and the

respective Middle English (ME) dialect area. The mapping of dialects follows Baugh and Cable (2002: 191).

Map 1. Middle English dialect areas (from: Baugh and Cable (2002)).

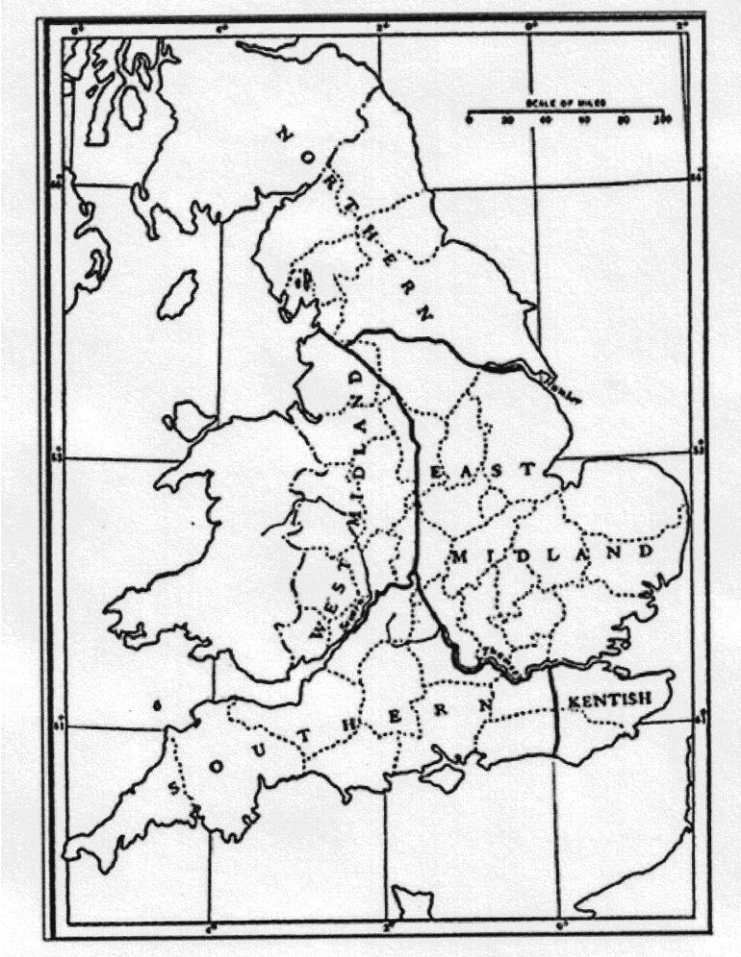


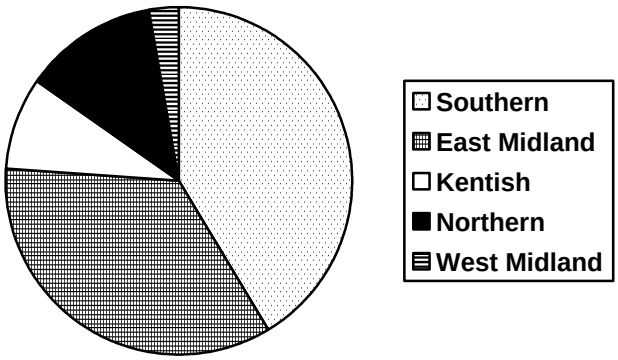
Table 1. The 1582 survey: Number of Seamen, County and ME dialect area

| County | Number of Seamen | Middle English Dialect Area |
|---|---|---|
| London | 1324 | East Midland |
| Essex | 693 | East Midland |
| Norfolk | 1670 | East Midland |
| Suffolk | 1282 | East Midland |
| Cornwall | 1918 | Southern |
| Devon | 2165 | Southern |
| Dorset | 645 | Southern |
| Hampshire | 370 | Southern |
| Sussex | 693 | Southern |
| Kent | 243 | Kentish |
| Cinque Ports | 1052 | Kentish |
| Bristol and Somerset | 512 | Southern |
| Gloucestershire | 220 | Southern/West Midland |
| Yorkshire | 880 | Northern |
| The North | 851 | Northern |
| Lincolnshire | 449 | East Midland |
| Cheshire and Lancashire | 324 | West Midland |
| Cumberland | 212 | Northern |
| Total | 15503 | |

Table 2. The 1582 survey: Number of seamen per ME dialect area

| Middle English Dialect Area | Seamen |
|---|---|
| East Midland | 5418 (34.9%) |
| Southern | 6413 (41.4%) |
| Kentish | 1295 (8.5%) |
| Northern | 1943 (12.5%) |
| West Midland | 434 (2.8%) |

Graph 1. Percentages of seamen per ME dialect area




Following Trudgill, who argues that the new variety will consist mainly of majority forms, we should expect for Ship English the survival of East Midland and Southern features while Northernism should be rare.

*1.2. Linguistic Features of Ship English*

The date of the population survey (1582) as well as the log books (ca 1650) fall into a period usually called Early Modern English (EModE).

In the following paragraph, several features that are described as "very frequent" in

Matthews' study of the log books will be discussed: do they show up in descriptions of EModE dialects? Have they left traces in 20th century English dialects?
These features are:

(1) Realization of ME /u:/ as [au] as in *mouth*

(2) Realization of ME /a:/ as [ei] as in *face*

(3) Realization of ME /u/ as [ʌ] as in *strut*

(4) Realization of ME /o:/ as [u:] as in *goose*

(5) Realization of ME /a/ as [æ] as in *trap*

(6) Interchange of /w/ and /v/

(7) Loss of postvocalic /r/

Detailed descriptions of EModE dialects are hard to come by, however: In his introduction to EModE, Barber (1976: 24) writes that although "[t]here was undoubtedly a good deal of regional variation in the language spoken in England [..t]his does not appear very clearly in the written records." The reason for this was the emergence of a written standard in England. This new standard was based on the ME dialect of the East Midlands and had become the form of English used in official settings (ibid.). The following study of frequent phonological and morphosyntactic features of Ship English relies on the standard works by Dobson (1968), Luick (1940), Wyld (1953), Zachrisson (1913) and Roger Lass's survey in the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (Lass 1992). The discussion of modern dialects follows Trudgill (1990), Wakelin (1972) and Wells (1982).

### *1.2.1. Linguistic Features of Ship English: Phonology*

**(1) The diphthongization of ME /u:/ to /au:/.**

During the vowel changes from 1400 onward, Middle English /u:/ (as in *house*) remained unchanged in the North but was diphthongized to /au/ in the South (Lass 1992: 76). The Southern pronunciation around 1650 was [ɔu] (ibid: 72). Luick

(1940: 560) writes as well that while the southumbrian parts of the country developed [ou], „in the Northern parts, that is all of Scotland and most of Northern England, ME [u] was preserved."[4] Zachrisson (1913: 78-80) also mentions [u:] as a dialect feature of the North, Dobson (1968: 683) finds [u:] only among northern orthoepists.

This Southern diphthong, whether it was [au] or [ɔu] is pervasive in the log books:

"The variations from normal spelling are extremely rare in these words in the logs", Matthews (1935: 218) finds, "even the most unorthodox spellers consistently reproduce the normal *ou*, *ow*. " The "normal" spelling of course reflects the Southern and Midland pronunciation that was the basis of emerging Standard English.

**(2) Diphthongization of ME /a:/ to /ei/.**

ME /a:/ (as in *daze*) was diphthongized to /ei/ in the South. Luick (1940:581, 741) writes about this change that " [it] only happened in the South; Northern English has [ei] in the final sound and before voiced consonants; in all other cases *i* is produced so weakly that it is inaudible. In Scotland as well as Ireland, [e][5] is still unchanged." For 1650, Lass (1992: 72) suggests a pronunciation similar to [ɛ:].

In the logs, Matthews (1935: 213) finds "innumerable forms in which *ai*, *ay* are substituted for *a*". Taking other misspellings into account, he thinks it likely that the sailor's pronunciation was something like [ei] or a monophthong similar to it, which would tie in with Lass's data. Matthews cites examples such as *traide, cheysed, maid*.

**(3) Split of ME /u/ into /ʌ/ and /ʊ/.**

Until this day, the *cut/put* split in certain phonological environments is a salient feature of the Southern dialects – they vary between /ʌ/ and /ʊ/ in the reflex of ME /u/ while the North and Midland dialects kept /ʊ/ in all contexts (Lass 1992: 89).

[4] My translation.
[5] The development towards [ei] "stopped" at [e] here.

First solid evidence for this split dates from 1640 (Lass 1992:89). The split, although presumably recent, seems pervasive in the seamen's speech: Looking at representations of what is now the StE [ʌ]-sound, Matthews (1935: 210) finds that the principal substitution for the letter *u* is *a*, indicating that the writer's pronunciation was somewhere near [ʌ] – a realization that never existed in the North. He mentions examples such as *flattering* (fluttering).

**(4) Split of ME /o:/ into /u:/ and /i:/.**

ME /o:/ (as in *boot*) developed into /u:/ in the South and /i:/ in the North (Lass 1992:76). Luick (1940: 555) finds evidence for the change to [u:] in most of Southumbria, Lancashire, and southern parts of Yorkshire and Cumberland. Zachrisson (1913: 77-80) also mentions "the North English development of o: > (ü°) or (y°)."

The sailors apparently did not have the fronted Northern version of the vowel: Matthews (1935: 209) finds "ample evidence in the logs that the present-day Standard vowel [u:] in words spelled with *oo, o* was in general use among the 17th century seamen, for there are frequent substitutions of *u, ew, eu* in such words." He gives examples such as *prufing* (*proving*), *shewting* (*shooting*).

**(5) Split of ME /a/ into /a:/ and /æ/.**

The realization of the *trap* vowel is another North-South shibboleth in England as Southern dialects have [æ] while the North has [a:]. The difference is hard to tell by looking at written forms and Matthews (1935: 202) is unsure what to make of forms like *carstle* or *Marster.*[6] "This lengthened vowel might have been either æ or a." Thus we cannot be sure about the dialect affiliation here; however, a pronunciation as [æ] is more likely if Lass (1992: 104) is correct in dating the development back to the 18th century.

[6] According to Matthews, the *r* denotes lengthening.

(6) **Interchange of /w/ and /v/.**

Wakelin (1972: 95-6) notes that speakers in East Anglia and the Southwest pronounce initial [v] like [w] and vice versa; evidence is found in spellings from the 1200s onwards.Wyld (1953: 180) describes this as a traditional London feature: "The interchange of *w* and *v* […] is at least as old as the fifteenth century, and was probably not confined to London." To this day, the /w/ versus /v/ interchange is recorded in the traditional dialects of Southern England while it is not found in the North.

Matthews (1935: 235): "The interchange of *w* and *v* […] is reflected by a many spellings in the logs […]" in words like *Woyag, Wineger, vayed* (*weighed*) or *Avay*.

(7) **Loss of postvocalic /r/.**

On the issue of rhoticity, Lass (1992: 115) asserts that

> [w]e can conclude that in less formal speech /r/-loss began sporadically in the fifteenth century; that in the seventeenth it had weakened postvocalic allophones; and that in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century it was generally still pronounced in all positions, but by the 1740s to 1770s was on the way to deletion, perhaps especially after low vowels. Weakening and loss became less variable and more codified as the century progressed; by the 1790s /r/-less pronunciations must have been very common, and increasing.

However, the history of rhoticity is contested: Dobson (1968: 992) finds loss of *r* first mentioned by his orthoepists around 1800. Trudgill and Gordon's (2000: 120) data from New Zealand suggests that non-London varieties remained rhotic at least until the late 18th century.

In the logs, "the non-pronunciation of medial r occurring before a consonant is reflected in a great many log-spellings. These spellings [..] reflect pronunciations similar to the present-day Southern Standard." (Matthews 1935:236) Examples are

*Machand* (*Merchant*) or *Noth* (*North*). This seems to suggest that the sailors were surprisingly far advanced on the way towards an *r*-less dialect. (But note that they are still rhotic: they still have an optional /r/.) As the loss of /r/ started in southeastern England while the southwest (as well as the North) is traditionally rhotic (Wells 1982; Trudgill 1990: 26), this allows us to locate the origin of this feature in London or the southeast.

### *1.2.2. Linguistic Features of Ship English: Morphosyntax*

**(1) Present tense verb paradigm**

Bailey and Ross' (1988: 199-200) account of the verb paradigm of Ship English shows three patterns of interest: Unmarked forms occur in all cases. The first and the third person take the –s suffix in singular and plural. The frequency of 3rd person singular –th decreases over time. Examples include *I takes it all to be Dutch forgery; we has observed; The Commodore* […] *seem to be very pleased.*

Uninflected verb forms are not discussed in the literature, except for Wyld (1953: 337) who merely notes that they occur among uneducated speakers. It is probably a simplification process as often found in vernacular speech.

Concerning the abundance of –s suffixes, Lass (1992: 163) finds that, in the third person singular, -s had replaced -th by 1600. In plural forms, however, the –s suffix "appears considerably later than the {-s} singular, and if it too is northern (as seems likely), it represents a later diffusion. […] It is common throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a minority alternant of zero, and persists sporadically into the eighteenth century" (Lass 1992: 166). The StE zero plural suffix is the majority form by 1500, "but both the Southern {-th} and the (Northern) East Midlands {-s} were available and persist into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

At the time of the log writers, the standard paradigm with zero plural and third singular –s should have been well established and is certainly reflected in the data. It is interesting, however, that the most common minority variant should be Northern

–s rather than Southern –th. Concerning the plural –s, however, Wyld (1953: 339) argues that it is not a Northernism but spread in the speech of "vulgar people" who introduced it analogous to the 3rd singular form. However, the occurrence of –s in first person verbs cannot be explained in that way.

**(2) Past tense and perfect paradigm**

Past tense marking, according to Bailey and Ross (1988: 202), was optional. Unmarked past tense forms are pervasive besides StE forms: *this day we kill a Deare; It Thundered, and Lightned and Rain very hard.* The strong verb – weak verb distribution differs markedly from StE: *this day we catched at least 50 Albecores; we tookt in the Virgins Prises; sugar which you had loaden on the Globe.*

The literature is not very rewarding on this issue; Wyld (1953: 344) only notes that participles in –*en* are a Midland feature, which might account for the several forms of *loaden* found in the data.

**(3) *Be* paradigm**

Bailey&Ross (1988: 200) note that plural forms of *be* vary a lot among the three alternants *are, is* and uninflected *be*. *They bee well sett people and fatt… there face are painted very Rudely; those which is a scare* [sic] *commodity.* Lass (1992: 176) writes that *are* was not stabilized until the seventeenth century. Wyld (1953:355) agrees:

> the present day *are*, derived from the E. Midlands, and ultimately from the North, comes only gradually into general use in London and the South. The Southern Pl. bith, &c., was widely used in the fifteenth century, by the side of the Midland *bin*, *been* or *be*."

Thus, the *be*-paradigm is approaching the StE system but shows strong remnants of the East Midland system with the archaic "be" plural forms. But just like the rest of the verb paradigm, it shows some idiosyncrasies such as *is* as a plural form.

In general, keeping in mind that our data is from after 1650, the sailors' morphosyntax seems rather conservative in that they keep a lot of dialectisms, which were on their way out in general usage.

Table 3. Overview Ship English features with dialect origin

| **Feature** | **Probable dialect origin** |
|---|---|
| (1) ME /u:/ diphthongization | Southern, Midland |
| (2) ME /a:/ diphthongization | Southern, Midland |
| (3) Split of ME /u/ | Southern |
| (4) Split of ME /o:/ | Southern, Midland |
| (5) Split of ME /a/ | Ambiguous |
| (6) Interchange of /w/ and /v/ | Southern, Midland, London |
| (7) Loss of postvocalic /r/ | Southeast, London |
| (8) Morphosyntax | Ambiguous |

*2.1. Results.*

The findings support the suggested influence of Southern and Mid Eastland varieties on Ship English. Features (1) – (4), (6) and (7) seem to be quite clearly of a Southern or Midland origin. Particularly interesting features that deserve further attention are the *be*-paradigm and non-rhotic pronunciations. Although these results do not rest on solid quantitative findings, it is still apparent that all of the features that Matthews describes as common point to a Southern/East Midland dialect basis.
The evidence allows some (tentative, see below) statements about Ship English:
By the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the English seafaring community had developed a distinctive sociolect. Although we cannot know how self-contained this

variety was, the social coherence of the seafaring community supports this argument. The language of sailors was apparently very much influenced by the dialects spoken in the South and the eastern Midlands of the British Isles.

*2.2. Problems.*

There are some obvious problems with historical sociolinguistic work like this one. .

(1) Overgeneralization

As with any kind of dialect research, we must be careful not to expect a homogenous variety. It goes without saying that there is not a single Ship English, just as there is not one “Scottish English” or “London English” but that we are dealing with a multifaceted variety here. Navy soldiers' speech probably differed from the merchant shipmaster's lect. This ties in with the problem discussed above about the actual existence of Ship English. But even if there never was a homogenous sailor’s lect, the argument developed here shows that certain regional features were pervasive in their speech.

(2) Bidialectism

It seems reasonable to picture the sailors as bidialectal, also having their “native”, local childhood dialect at their disposal. It might be that Ship English was their variety of choice in any situation; it might be that they used their local variety when writing logs and Ship English only when talking to their pals; it might be that Ship English did not exist at all and what we find in the logs is just a collection of individual regional dialect performances. However, we saw above that nonlinguistic sources support the idea of a distinctive sailors' variety. And even if the log entries do only reflect the idiolect of their author – we would still expect those features that are pervasive in the logs to also occur often in the spoken language aboard.

(3) Lack and unreliability of data

Speakers of Ship English died several hundred years ago. There are no recordings of their speech and only a few written sources, very restricted in their content. Matthews worked with ship logs, which mainly consist of entries about the weather and the position of the ship. Furthermore, the sailors who wrote these entries were among the educated elite aboard ship – they could actually write and had at least a limited schooling and access to normative StE. Thus, the sources also eclipse an important part of the speech community. Scarcity of sources also hampers the overall research: For this paper, we worked with a Middle English dialect map,[7] a population survey from 1582,[8] and speech data from the 1650ies onward.

(4) Interpretation of data

Inferring the pronunciation of a word from its spelling, like Matthews did for the log books, is of course a tricky business. Evidently, the researcher is given much room for interpretation and, especially if looking at forms that were written two hundred years ago, might come to mistaken conclusions. The problem is covered in more detail in McIntosh (1989). However, this is a problem that all historical linguistic research must face and there is no way of avoiding it.

(5) Lack of dialect research.

More generally, when it comes to looking at historical dialects – the input dialects of Ship English – reliable sources are rare. Thus, our data is not only limited in itself but also lacks secondary sources for valid interpretation. What makes this issue particularly important for this study is that one of the major input varieties, the East Midland dialect, was also the main contributor to emerging StE. Thus, for some of the features it could be argued that we are actually dealing with StE influences.

[7] Which should not be a problem as dialects develop gradually and dialect "borders" do not shift quickly.

[8] We do not know how reliable this survey is; however, it works well as a circular argument in that it supports our linguistic findings.

However, their limited schooling and the blatant idiosyncrasies and general variability in spelling make the sailors unlikely leaders in the movement towards StE. In addition to that, we find several grammatical forms (think about the *be* paradigm) that depart from the most basic StE rules.

(6) Addenda.

A few more facts that might be of importance to the study of Ship English are listed below: Boys usually entered the trade between the age of 12 and 17 (Fury 2002:7), thus young enough to acquire new speech forms. The ships were manned per voyage. A crew would be assembled, the seamen promised a certain wage. After the trip was over, they would disband to their homes and families, enrolling for the next voyage when they needed money. This means a constant intermixing of speakers on the ships. Most of the 17th century sailors were engaged in the coasting trade: shipping wheat, cloth and coal from town to town around the British Isles. They would thus not come in contact with many foreign languages and would not spend long periods of time in a port that was not their home. In general, until the 17th century, the overwhelming majority of the sailors would be engaged in the merchant marine. In wartime, the Navy relied on merchant ships to replenish the fleet and on merchant seamen to sail the warships while Navy soldiers and gunners did the fighting. The fleet that beat the Armada in 1588, for instance, consisted of 34 Queen's Ships and 163 merchantmen (Oppenheim 1896:163). It is therefore unlikely that the military curriculum of the Navy had an important impact.

*2.3. Implications.*

To end this paper, we might take a look at how our account of Ship English fits into the research done on dialect origins of anglophone creoles. Will it support the notion of the influence of nautical speech on creole genesis? First, we should keep in mind Mühlhäusler's (1986: 98) caveat concerning Ship English and pidgin or creole

development:

> nautical English is not a stable monolithic language […In addition to that], there is considerable overlap between nautical English and other forms of non-Standard English. Finally, even if nautical English was the model, it was not imitated in full, but acquired […] in a more or less modified form.

(Note, however, that in this quote, "nautical English" could be replaced with any other variety of English and the statement would still be true.)

Hancock (1994) lists several breakdowns for regionalisms in creole vocabulary: John Holm for example traces 12 percent of regionalisms in Nicaraguan English creole back to southwestern dialects. For Krio, Hancock finds 30 to 40 percent of English items matching a southwestern English form. Other possible influences discussed are Scottish and Irish English, their influence, however, does not match up to the Southwestern contribution. The evidence "indicate[s] that the southwestern dialects occupied an important place in the metropolitan component during the formative period of the Atlantic anglophone creoles" (Hancock 1994). Keeping in mind that Irish English was influenced by settlers from the Southwest as well, the contribution of southwestern English dialect forms seems considerable. The fact that Southwestern English is one of the most conservative varieties might also contribute to this perception: Some features that were at one time widespread might have survived in the Southwest only.

The suggested influence of the nautical variety could thus be supported by further studies in this area. As far as this paper is concerned, however, this superficial look at creole formation merely is to show that the study of Ship English, apart from offering insights into the sociolinguistic history of English, also can yield interesting results for other areas of language studies.

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